PEACE
December 9, 2007

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Psalm 72:1–7
Matthew 3:1–12
Isaiah 11:1–9

"They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea."
Isaiah 11:9 (NRSV)

Advent comes to us in the grey, bleak days of December when things get
darker and darker and colder and shorter. It comes to us when,
with the tinny, glitzy surroundings of our material pleasures and
prosperities,
we know in our inner heart of hearts that all that glitters is not gold. . . .
It is into such a season as this, against the tide, against the world,
against the culture, against the fashion, that we Christians are invited
to hope in the face of hopelessness. Advent is the season of hope:
that the darkness will not cover the light,
that the cold will not overwhelm the warmth,
that hatred will not prevail over love,
and that repression will not triumph over freedom.

Peter J. Gomes
The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them. . . .
They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain.

Nineteenth-century American artist Edward Hicks loved that vision so much that he painted it more than 100 times: *The Peaceable Kingdom*. I'm sure you've seen it. It hangs in a lot of ministers' offices and elementary school classrooms. The animals are all there: wolf and lamb, leopard and kid, calf and lion. Hicks gave all the animals expressive faces that look a little human. The eyes are big, unnaturally big, wide open, as if they've just been

startled by something. In fact, that was the artist's point and intent. This vision is not something one sees every day—or ever, for that matter. It is startling. And, in the middle, a child, a little boy or girl—you can't really tell —his or her eyes are also wide open in astonishment at what is transpiring.

Woody Allen observed once that when the calf and the lion lie down together, the calf isn't going to get much sleep. Those animals, of course, are natural adversaries. It's not that they don't like one another. It's just how they are made. Wolves, leopards, and lions need protein. Lambs, kids, and calves are protein. So it is startling, astonishing, a kind of top-to-bottom reorganization of creation with all the brutality and violence left out: creation reordered, healed, mended, put right. And the child is in the midst of it.

The yearning for peace is timeless and universal. All people want peace for themselves and their children. It is a longing that is deep within the human heart.

It is one of the great and enduring themes of the Bible in both Old and New Testaments. At the birth of Jesus, an angel chorus sings about peace on earth. At Jesus' dedication in the temple, old Simeon prays, "Lord, now lettest thy servant depart in peace, for my eyes have seen thy salvation." Jesus tells his disciples that when they enter a house they should say a blessing, "Peace be to this house." When he approached Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Jesus stopped when he saw the city walls and towers and gates gleaming on Mount Zion. He wept and he said, "If only you had known the things that make for peace." And later that very day, as he entered the city to the cheers and hosannas of the crowd, the people said, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven!"

The first thing the risen Christ said to his disciples when he appeared in their midst was "Peace be with you." And when the first Christians worshiped, they "passed the peace," repeating the words of the risen Lord as they embraced or shook hands: "Peace be with you."

In the centuries before, the yearning for peace was deeply part of Israel's hope. Other than a fairly brief period of time, a hundred years at the most, with King David's reign in the middle, Israel didn't have much peace. Buffeted by powerful empires—Assyria, Babylon, Egypt—Israel was invaded, occupied, held hostage, and sent into exile. And all the while the hope for a day of peace would not die. God means for there to be peace—a peace not based on military victory, but on justice, in the fair, equal, compassionate treatment of all the people. The day of the Lord, the coming of God's messiah, would be—more than anything else—an occasion of peace.

One of the most eloquent expressions of that yearning is in the book of the prophet Isaiah. The scene is one of desolation, a battlefield perhaps; the land has been laid waste, the trees shattered, broken, a battlefield on which the army of Israel was once again defeated. The passage always reminds me of a scene in the motion picture *Patton,* when General George Patton surveys a battlefield where German and American forces fought to a draw; neither side won. Both sides suffered appalling casualties. The field itself was a scene of utter devastation—smoky ruins, not a building, not even a tree left standing. Patton says, "God forgive me, but I love this." In the Isaiah passage there is a stump—there are a lot of stumps on battlefields—an eloquent symbol of desolation and ending and defeat and death. It is the Davidic monarchy: at an end, cut off, terminated, gone. But wait, the prophet commands. Look: out of that dried-up stump, a green shoot, a shoot of Jesse, who was David's father. Incredibly, out of the symbol of death, life, newness, creation continuing. The poet sees a vision, a precious vision, of the coming day of the Lord: creation healed, brutality gone, everything put right, old enemies reconciled.

> The wolf shall lie down with the lamb,
> the leopard and the kid, the calf and the lion . . . ,
> and a little child shall lead them. . . .
> They will not hurt or destroy on my holy mountain.

The simple fact is that there has never been a time when there wasn't a war happening somewhere in the world. Woody Allen seems closer to reality than Isaiah. Today, December 9, 2007, we read the newspaper and hold our breath and pray that there won't be another suicide bomber. Peace seems remote; the hope for peace not realistic. Christians have always had to live in the tension between Isaiah's peaceable kingdom and the real world, between Jesus' teaching about peaceful nonviolence and a world where rogue nations invade weaker neighbors, a world where tyranny and cruelty lurk just beneath the surface.

The longing for peace is so deep that sometimes it causes us to act irresponsibly and dangerously. After the appalling slaughter of World War I, with huge armies facing one another and killing one another, decimating an entire generation of young Germans and French and British, the world said, "No more. Never again." Two decades later, when Nazi Germany began to threaten its neighbors, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain went to Munich to meet Adolph Hitler, negotiated away most of what was Czechoslovakia, and returned to England to announce that he had achieved "peace in our time." It was no such thing, of course. Winston Churchill saw the great danger, urged his nation to prepare for war and sacrifice in the great cause of defeating Fascism. Was there an alternative? Scholars debate, and the answer is usually "probably not." A commitment to peace that will not fight encourages tyranny. Christians have always struggled

with this issue. Jesus, on the one hand, seemed to teach nonviolence. If someone strikes you on the cheek, turn the other cheek. He did not, however, say what to do if someone is threatening your children. He did not say what a nation should do when its citizens are threatened. He did not prescribe what to do when the police are rounding up all the Jews and sending them to extermination camps.

The fourth-century theologian Augustine said that while war is always tragic and evil, it is also sometimes necessary. Augustine worked out the conditions under which war is legitimate and called it the just war theory. Closer to our own time, many American Christians turned to pacifism after World War I and its senseless slaughter and, finally, meaningless conclusion. The magazine with which I am affiliated, the *Christian Century*, was a strong proponent of isolationism, "pragmatic nonintervention," as they called it, and argued against preparing for war, even as the Nazis gained control of Germany and started invading their neighbors. Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the magazine's contributing editors and a pacifist, changed his mind, started to talk about responsibility as an expression of Christian love, doing what is necessary to protect one's community, family, and values we hold dear. He broke with the *Christian Century* over the issue, formed his own journal, appropriately named it *Christianity and Crisis*, and in it wrote in February of 1941, "There are historic situations in which refusal to defend the inheritance of a civilization, however imperfect, against tyranny and aggression may result in consequences even worse than war." The *Christian Century* changed its mind, too, after Pearl Harbor.

Ministers have always counseled with young men and women whose commitment to peace would not allow them to bear arms and fight: conscientious objection. And our government, at its best, has allowed for that personal conscience-informed expression by providing alternative ways to serve. But just as important are all those young men and women who abhor war and yearn for peace, yet feel responsible to be part of whatever is happening to, or by, our nation. Peter Gomes, in his new book, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*, tells about a Harvard student who talked to him about responsibility after 9/11 and wanting to serve, ended up joining the Marine Corps, going to Iraq, served there with distinction, and struggled mightily with the morality of the decision. He was not a conscientious objector nor a "pass-the-ammunition" warrior. He was a "conscientious participant," Gomes said. We need to be mindful of him—praying for him and the many like him (see p. 117).

We still live in the tension between the yearning for peace, the Peaceable Kingdom, the Peace of Jesus Christ, and the reality of the world. And we need, perhaps more than ever, to wait and watch for signs of peace, for the tiny, green shoot, sprouting from the stump of Jesse.

Will Campbell is a witty, salty Southern Baptist preacher and social activist. In a book he called *Soul among Lions,* he observes that "most of the serious wars today are by people of competing religions. That's absurd. Let's do it this way: Judaism is the oldest of the three major faiths. Christianity is the adolescent in the middle, and Islam is the youngest. The youngest is generally the favored in the family. So let's all go to their house, all kneel on a rug and put our heads to the ground and pray, vowing as we do never to kill one another again in the name of God" (p. 49).

Something a little like that, something very important, happened recently and was almost totally ignored by the press. I guess violence is much more interesting and newsworthy than reconciliation. In any event, on October 13, 138 of the world's leading Muslim clerics and scholars issued an "open letter" to "Leaders of Christian Churches everywhere." The letter calls for peace based on the most fundamental tenets of both Christianity and Islam: love for God and love for neighbor. The letter says the peace of the world depends on peace between Christians and Muslims. The letter says that love for one another is not peripheral for Islam but central as it is for Christians, as is respect for individual freedom of conscience. And the letter says that the state of their (Muslim) souls depends on making peace with Christians.

It is a remarkable letter, particularly in light of statements by some Christian leaders calling Islam a violent religion, criticizing Islamic leaders for not condemning violence and not reaching out in friendship to Christians and Jews.

A response was quickly put together by the Yale Divinity School Center for Faith and Culture. The statement expresses gratitude for the Islamic leaders' identification of the common ground on which Muslims and Christians stand—love for God and neighbor—and begins with an apology for historic Christian hostility toward Islam, expressed in the Crusades and the excesses of the "war on terror," which, regardless of what we mean by it, is widely regarded in the Islamic world as yet another attack on Islam. Muslims and Christians make up more than one half of the world's population. "Without peace and justice between us, there can be no meaningful peace in the world," the statement says several times.

The Christian statement pushes back by including Judaism in the equation and by suggesting that freedom for people to worship according to their conscience in Islamic societies is part of it as well: "Abandoning all hatred and strife, we must engage in interfaith dialogue as those who seek each other's good."

Notice: "dialogue as those who seek each other's good"—that is, not each other's conversion. It is time to think about that, to let go, because of the gospel imperative about peace and justice, of the mission priority of

conversion in light of another mission priority of peace, based on mutual respect, seeking “each other’s good.” God will, in God’s good time, sort out the whole “who’s right and who’s wrong” business when it comes to religious doctrine. What we are called to do is witness to God’s love revealed in Jesus Christ and then faithfully follow our Lord and to watch and wait and hurry to join him in the great project of peace on earth.

The statement concludes, “The task is daunting—the stakes are great. The future of the world depends on our ability as Christians and Muslims to live together in peace.”

The next step is for Muslim and Jewish and Christian leaders to meet together and together to ask what is it that God calls us to do to live in peace. The letter was published in a full-page ad in the *New York Times* on November 18. Harvard’s Harvey Cox and Diana Eck signed. So did Bill Hybels of Willow Creek and Rick Warren of Saddleback Church. Robert Schuller signed and Father Don Senior, President of Catholic Theological Union here in Chicago, and Ian Torrance, President of Princeton, and Jim Wallis of *Sojourners*, and David Neff for *Christianity Today*, and I signed it, too.

As I signed, glad to be part of it all, I thought about how remarkable that all those Christian leaders, with their different theological and doctrinal positions, their different and conflicting notions of what is moral and what is not, our contrasting styles of worship and of being church—Willow Creek and Fourth Presbyterian Church, Saddleback and Harvard, Wheaton and Catholic Theological Union—could agree on this, how if we can come together however briefly, stop arguing and insulting each other and stand together on the common ground of peace, it is a miracle indeed, a fresh green shoot growing up in our midst.

And I thought about John the Baptist who strides across the Advent stage every year, proclaiming the coming of the savior, castigating the religious types, Pharisees and Sadducees—not because they are bad people, but for a failure of imagination; so rigid and certain of their own rightness that they are unable to see signs of God’s love and peace growing up in their midst.

And I thought about that child, that wide-eyed dear child in Edward Hicks’ painting, standing there so innocently in the midst of the animals. I thought about Isaiah’s promise that a little child will lead them.

I saw it happen this week. I saw a child leading, a child with a significant challenge—Down syndrome; my granddaughter Rachel, thirteen now, in fifth grade, struggling to keep up, nothing is easy for her. We went to class with her and we saw how Rachel has transformed a typical class of noisy, lively preadolescents into caring and kind friends, who planned a surprise

birthday party for Rachel and sang “Happy Birthday” to her—which thrilled her beyond description—and each brought a small birthday present, which Rachel loved, and each has been taught something important about caring and love and later, I am sure, about justice and kindness and peace.

It is Advent and the child is coming.

Frederick Buechner wrote,

> The kingdom of God is so close we can almost reach out our hands and touch it. It is so close that sometimes it almost reaches out and takes us by the hand. . . . All over the world you can hear it stirring, if you stop to listen. Good things are happening in and through all sorts of people. . . . Tolerance, Compassion, Sanity, Hope, Justice.
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> The wolf shall live with the lamb,
> the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
> the calf and the lion and the fatling together
> and a little child shall lead them.

Amen.